LONG-H

Truckers of the 28th Transportation Battalion in Mannheim, Germany, haul mail, spare parts and other vital cargoes across Europe.

28TH TRANSPORTATION BATTALION

AUL TRUCKERS

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

IT doesn't have to be February in Central Europe for the days to be short, dark and dreary. From October through March cloudy days and persistent rain are regular occurrences.

Army truckers from the Mannheim, Germany-based 28th Transportation Battalion have collectively logged millions of miles on the roads of Europe, no doubt making them some of the most seasoned bad-weather drivers in the Army.

Among U.S. Army, Europe, units, their "Red Ball-Express"-type mission — not unlike the truck convoy system of that name used to supply the Allies during World War II — that extends 24 hours a day, seven days a week, has earned them the nickname "long-haul truckers."

They're the men and women units depend on to deliver ammunition and spare parts, and every soldier far from home depends on them to receive morale-boosting mail and packages from loved ones.

PV2 Jessica Daniel, driver of an M-915-series vehicle, primarily hauls mail, she said, from the international pick-up point at Rhein-Main Airport in Frankfurt, Germany, to locations throughout Central Europe. Other drivers, depending on their training and level of expertise, also transport "general cargo" – anything from empty containers and machinery to ammunition.

Missions often take drivers as far north as Antwerp, Belgium, to Garmisch in the southernmost tip of Germany and across borders into former Warsaw-Pact countries.

"About 140 trucks are on the road at any one time," said CPT Ed Gawlik III, battalion operations officer. One day, five of the battalion's 18-wheelers were en route over Germany's high-speed autobahns to the port of Bremerhaven, a nine-and-a-half-hour drive from Mannheim (at 80 kilometers per hour). Drivers spent the night there at a German army depot.

"One thing that's unique about this unit," Gawlik said, "is that we're entrusting young soldiers, right out of high school, with this huge, $180,000 piece of equipment, sometimes sending them over very narrow streets and sometimes with classified cargo."

Collectively, the unit is composed of lower enlisted soldiers and more experienced NCOs. One staff sergeant, on his second tour with the battalion, for example, "has accumulated more than 100,000 road

SGT Ernest Corral of the 28th Trans. Bn. prepares to move a load of mail to an Army post office in Germany.

miles in our trucks," Gawlik said.

In October, soldiers of the unit who traveled to Poland to support the V Corps exercise Victory Strike were on the road for three weeks, said SFC Chris Warner. A truck master in the battalion's 68th Trans. Co., she tracks the vehicles, cargoes and drivers' estimated times of arrival to keep the battalion commander, and the units who are anticipating the arrival of goods, informed.

Breakdowns, treacherous road conditions and other unforeseen events can cause occasional delays, said battalion operations and security NCO MSG Kenneth Melton.

"I saw a Mercedes run right under a German truck once as the truck entered the highway from a rest stop," Melton said.

As is true of most learning ventures, ease in driving and dealing effectively with tense situations that may arise on the road come from experience, Melton said.

Drivers new to the unit get some assistance early on at the battalion-run driver's academy conducted at Coleman Barracks, the battalion's home in Mannheim. There the new personnel learn about the special considerations and requirements of driving in Germany.

"It takes eight to 10 weeks to train a new driver," said SGT William Demauri, a company Army vehicle instructor. A "student driver" must log 3,000 miles with an experienced driver-instructor before completing the training.

One of the most challenging aspects of the training is learning to back something that's 58 feet long into an alley, Melton said. Prospective drivers must also be able to dock their trailer and parallel park.

When the driver completes that

training, he's accompanied on a 50-mile drive, over city streets and autobahns, by a "check rider" who's responsible for "clearing the driver," Demauri said, and assuring the commander that he's ready to roll.

"We want to ensure that no driver gets complacent," Demauri added. "He or she might be hauling 50,000 pounds of ammunition." When that's the case, an armed guard is on board.

Classroom instruction focuses on the handling of hazardous material, operating procedures when driving on airfields, and such other requirements as what personal items must be carried on each trip. Those include a change of clothes, fuel coupons, a certain amount of cash and a cot.

When questions arise, drivers are always close to home via their cell phones, Demauri said.

Additionally, a computerized tracking system tracks drivers and allows them to send and receive e-mail. "If a driver is unsure about where he is, for example, he can send information about mile markers to the operations center, where we can pinpoint his location," said Warner.

Each of the battalion's five companies has 61 trucks, a collection of M-915A1s and M-915A3s, and two recovery vehicles. The A1s have been in use since 1982, have logged hundreds of thousands of miles, collectively, and require considerable maintenance.

"We rely on each company's maintenance section to keep the vehicles running," Warner said.

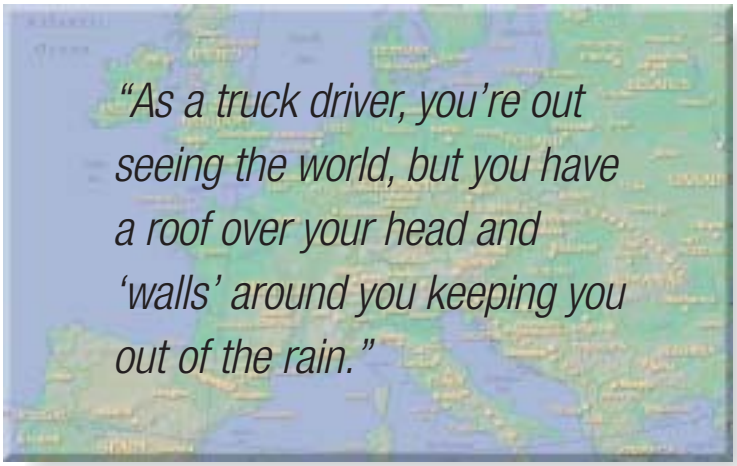
Transportation movement requests from the U.S. Army and other of the joint services come to the battalion through computers manned by the battalion's highway movement control specialists, including SFC Brian Watson.

"Our drivers have traveled 700 miles one way into the Czech Republic and Slovakia," Watson said, "to support humanitarian-aid missions, and through October 2002, a company rotated in and out of Tazar, Hungary."

Most missions are single-driver missions. So the routes can get long, lonely and monotonous. Every driver has to be able to replace his or her rig's monster-size tires and know what to do if

Each of the 28th Transportation Battalion's five companies has 61 trucks, a collection of M-915A1s and M-915A3s, and two recovery vehicles.

Before getting on the road for another mission, Corral backs his truck up to a loading dock. Army truckers make deliveries to installations throughout Europe.



the truck breaks down or there's any kind of emergency on the road.

"We have a 4 foot, 9 inch female driver," said Melton. "When people see her driving one of these rigs, they do a double-take. She has to be able to change those tires just like everyone else."

To ensure the drivers' safety and that of others on the road, USAREUR regulations prohibit drivers from spending more than 10 hours on the road without an eight-hour break. In some cases, such as in war time, or to support special contingency operations, the time limit can be extended, Warner said.

"When I was driving for the battalion in 1987, there was no such rule," Melton said. "We'd take off on a Monday and return on Friday, sometimes driving 18 hours at a time."

Those were also the days when many more U.S. troops were stationed in Europe, and major annual exercises required shiploads of vehicles and equipment to be sent from the United States to Europe and delivered to units positioned throughout Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

The Cold War was on, and convoys frequently moved back and forth to the Fulda Gap — at that time a potential invasion route from communist East Germany into the West. Melton had driven on a number of occasions to West Berlin, staying close to the bumpers of the protective West German police car that escorted him through the ominous East Zone, he said.

After the 1987 U.S.-USSR Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty went into effect, Melton was in a convoy that took the Soviet launcher systems to Mainz, Germany, where U.S. officials and others watched Soviet officials cut some of their systems in half. "We were on presidential orders because that was a national commitment," Melton said.

He was also in the last convoy into West Berlin when the Berlin Wall was still in place and in the first convoy into the city in 1989 after the Wall came down.

Today, the mission of the 28th Trans. Bn. remains the same — to get mail and equipment to the troops, he said. But mission planning has been simplified and resources better utilized, thanks to computerized systems.

A 66th Trans. Company driver receives verification of his delivery to the Military Air Terminal in Frankfurt, Germany.

At the same time, drivers get to see a lot of Europe. SPC Brandon Morris has been driving for the 68th Trans. Co. for three years. He's traveled to Luxembourg, Belgium, Poland and Hungary. "And there's nowhere in Germany I haven't been," he said.

"It's not always fun," Morris said. Rolling out of bed at midnight to be at the motor pool at 0100 and pick up the mail in Frankfurt, while most people are still sleeping, is something he's done countless times. "Sometimes it's miserable outside," he said. "Sometimes it's snowing, and you just don't want to be out there."

But, all in all, "being a truck driver is the best career in the Army," Melton added. "As a truck driver, you're out seeing the world, but you have a roof over your head and 'walls' around you keeping you out of the rain." □

A 28th Trans. Bn. vehicle rolls out the gate in Mannheim at the beginning of another delivery mission.